

## **Lithuanians in Australia**

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In Australia, Lithuanians have always been a tiny minority: they have never approached even 0.01% of Australia's total population. However, their impact on the Australian culture has been far greater than their numbers suggest.

A few Lithuanian migrants started trickling into Australia 170 years ago, but most of the earlier information is sketchy and anecdotal. Some early Lithuanian migrants had resettled from England to Australia during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but nothing further is known about them. One hundred and eighty-seven persons were evacuated from the three Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) in October 1940 and arrived in Brisbane two months later, in December 1940.

It was not until the late 1940s and early 1950s that larger numbers, i.e., approximately 10,000 Lithuanian migrants, came to Australia. Most of them were refugees, who had fled from Lithuania in or around 1944, to escape the second Soviet occupation of their country (1944-1990). These immigrants initially saw Australia as a temporary stopover, because they were hoping to return home soon. Their hopes were not fulfilled

Most post-war Lithuanian immigrants came to Australia as indentured labour; that is, every migrant over the age of 18 had to enter into a two year contract with the Australian government which obliged the migrant to work wherever directed. The contracts were strictly enforced, even if it meant that families were split up.

On completion of their Government contracts, some Lithuanians found the climate too trying; numerous others could not gain due recognition of their qualifications and training. Up to 2,000 of these people re-settled to the U.S.A. Smaller numbers went back to Germany, or left Australia permanently for other countries where their qualifications were recognized.

By 1996, the number of Lithuanians in Australia had dwindled down from 10,000 to 4,222, i.e., 0.00024% of the total Australian population of 17,752,882 (Potts, 2001, pers. comm., 24 January). Apart from the re-settlement just mentioned, the drop in numbers was caused by two further factors: natural deaths and the reluctance by some members of the second generation to register as Lithuanians.

There are very few Lithuanians in Tasmania, an Australian island state that happens to have approximately the same landmass as Lithuania (65,300 sq km). Some 40-100 Lithuanians now live in Tasmania.

Generally speaking, Lithuanians are well integrated into the Australian society. They have achieved a high proficiency in English and are participating in Australian cultural activities. A considerable proportion of Lithuanian immigrants also maintain, to varying degrees, their national heritage and their membership of Lithuanian associations.

Lithuanian-language newspapers published in Australia were initially required to print a quarter of their content in English. Two main Lithuanian-language newspapers in Australia are still being published now, although circulation keeps falling: the weekly *Mūsų Pastogė* in Sydney and the fortnightly *Tėviškės Aidai* in Melbourne. In addition, local bulletins appear in Adelaide and Brisbane. At the same time, Lithuanian communities are taking advantage of modern technology. Weekly Lithuanian broadcasts are transmitted across Australia, through the SBS networks. Internet websites have been established in Sydney, Brisbane and Perth, with more expected to follow in other centres.

### **Assimilation or preserving own culture?**

Unlike the 'guest-workers' in Europe, the migrants arriving in Australia after the Second World War were expected by the Australian Government to settle permanently and to assimilate. This official attitude was supported by many 'old' Australians' determination to retain their traditional Australian identity, even though such identity was difficult to define. Richard Boyer, the chairman of the ABC, complained in 1956 that, when 'invited by a group of new Australians to tell them what the Australian way of



\* A group of early Lithuanian Immigrants, at a picnic in New South Wales. (Date: not known)..

life was', he found 'putting it into words was one of the hardest tasks that ... [he had] ever faced'. (Ozolins, 1993, p.41).

Efforts to assimilate the newcomers quickly were not confined to government officials. English-born Lithuanian priest Rev Jonas Tamulis was not allowed by his Church authorities to return to his chaplaincy in Sydney because of his 'daring' plan to establish a nationality-based (Lithuanian) parish.

The obverse of assimilation, i.e., anti-assimilation, was discussed in the pre-war Lithuanian literature. Kazys Pakštas advocated the creation of a "Reserve Lithuania" (*Atsarginė Lietuva*) in Angola or British Honduras or at some other location, but his ideas were not realized (cf. Van Reenan, 1990, *passim*).

An attempt to preserve migrant cultures in Australia was initiated almost three decades ago, on 30 May 1978, when the *Report of the Review of Post-Arrival Programs and Services to Migrants* was tabled in the Federal House of Representatives. Commonly known as the Galbally Report, the document recommended, *inter alia*, 'that if our society develops multiculturalism through the broad concept of community education, it will gain much which has been lost to other nations' (Galbally, 1978, 9.8).

This recommendation was based on the observation that 'already our nation has been enriched by the artistic, intellectual and other attributes of migrant cultures' (Galbally, 1978, 9.8). Schools, ethnic affairs commissions and other community bodies, often buoyed by special-purpose Government funding, have since endeavoured to implement multicultural programs and greater ethnic awareness throughout Australia. Virtually nothing has been achieved, however, as far as the Lithuanians are concerned.

### **Contributions to Australian society**

The initial two-year work contracts were the Lithuanian migrants' first major contribution to Australia. They helped to solve an acute labour shortage in Australia, especially in outlying areas. Along with other European migrants, they relieved the shortage of domestic staff in hospitals, increased the output of building material, helped to build Australian homes, saved fruit and sugar crops, maintained railways, worked in sawmills, brick factories, cement works, on sewerage projects, water conservation, salt and brown coal mining, clearing land, quarrying, etc. (Dunsdorfs, 1975, p.29).

When speaking of Lithuanian migrants' contribution to Australia, the politicians and others usually emphasise the newcomers' economic impact. This is true, but is only a part of the full story. On arrival in this country, the 10,000 Lithuanians had joined other migrants in the rebuilding of Australia's capital structures that were to serve the nation for many decades to come. However, that was not all. These migrants could have accomplished a great deal more, if the Australian authorities had made full use of their skills and knowledge, instead of treating them all as unskilled labour (Marginson, 1997a, p.17). In spite of that, their economic contribution was significant at a time when Australia needed it most.

Did Lithuanian migrants take away jobs from 'old' Australians? This accusation is levelled from time to time, not only at the Lithuanians, but also at all migrants. It may be true in some cases, under certain circumstances; but it can hardly be applied to the Lithuanian migrants in this country. The author's preliminary estimates suggest that the 10,000 Lithuanians who came to Australia have created at least 11 000 jobs.

After completion of their two-year contracts, many Lithuanian newcomers established large building companies, new factories, retail shops, service and repair centres; skating rinks, tailor shops and even a complete town (Eucla). Many others became self-employed in small business and in all kinds of trades.

It is worth noting, however, that, while a great deal of research has been carried out in Australia over the past 40 years on the general economics of immigration, nothing of substance has been published to date on the specifics of Lithuanian immigrants and their particular contribution.

The Lithuanian immigrants have strengthened Australia in several other ways. Research at the University of Tasmania (Kazokas, 1992) has shown that the comparatively small intake of 10,000 Lithuanian migrants has given Australia 137 **artists**. Many of these artists have gradually moved to the forefront of Australian sculpture, painting, photography and other fields of creative arts.

While the mainstream Lithuanian literature continued developing under the Soviet rule (Kelertas, 1992), expatriate Lithuanian-language **writers** in Australia branched out with their own work. At least 25 volumes of Australian Lithuanian poetry were published up to 1989 (Jūragis, 1989, p. 4). Most of this accumulated cultural treasure has not been translated into English. This is a great pity because Australian Lithuanian poets have written in depth on many themes, including their new home, Australia.

The following **ballet** dancers of Lithuanian origin danced in leading Australian companies: *Ramona Ratas* - The Elizabethan Opera Ballet Company (1957); Borovansky Ballet (1959 -61); and foundation member of Australian Ballet (1962), including the Ballet's first overseas world tour (6 months, 1965-66). *Regina Plokštis* - Borovansky Ballet (1959-61). *Joseph Janušaitis* - Australian Ballet (1966-82). *Sally Wicks* (Puodžiūnas) - current dancer with Sydney Dance Company (1995-2002). *Janina Cunovas* (also known as Čiūnovas and Čiūnovienė) was a renowned ballet teacher in Australia and overseas. In 1996, she was named one of the world's best ten ballet teachers (Ward Warren, 1996).

Gifted Lithuanian musicians like *Povilas Matiukas* (violin, Adelaide) and *Motekaitis* (cello, Sydney) were invited to join Australia's leading symphony orchestras - but only after they had survived their two years' manual labouring contracts, working away from active music making. Pianist *Irena Vilnonis* received early recognition in Newcastle and Sydney; she later went on to win the ABC Piano and Vocal Competition in 1958.

Especially in the larger centres, Lithuanian migrants continued to preserve their culture with folk-dancing groups, choirs, traditional instrumental music and folk crafts. Lithuanian repertory theatres were also formed in several cities. The Lithuanians have a very rich heritage of folklore: about 200,000 folk songs alone are known to have been recorded.

Every two years since 1960, Australian Lithuanians have been staging a festival known as the Lithuanian Days. The programme usually spans a week, between Christmas and the New Year's Day, and is held in turn in one of the larger centres. The Lithuanian Days provide the forum to the various folk-dancing groups, choirs, and theatres. Art exhibitions are held. Various Australia-wide organizations hold their meetings.



Australian Lithuanians have not kept these cultural treasures to themselves: they shared them with anyone who wanted to join in. 80% of the dancers in the Hobart Lithuanian folk dancing group in the 1970s were Australians of British stock. For many years, there was an all-Australian choir in Launceston singing a wide repertoire of Lithuanian songs, under the direction of Jonas Krutulis (Taškūnas, 2005).

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**Left:** Lithuanian photographer, explorer and early conservationist, Olegas Truchanas. – An opera about him is now being written by composer C. Koukias.

On the last Monday night before Easter every year, there is an open **heritage** workshop at the University of Tasmania, demonstrating the traditional Lithuanian art of colouring and decorating Easter eggs. This is not a closed night just for the ethnics: it is an example of the Lithuanians sharing their heritage with everyone.

After arrival in Australia, the Lithuanians have passed on their love of nature. One of these **natural** Lithuanian environmentalists was *Olegas Truchanas*, known for his exploration of South-West Tasmania and for his beautiful photographs of Tasmania.

Lithuanian migrants have greatly valued **education** and **training**. They are said to have sent more children to higher education and trades than the national average (Martin, 1971, pp.100-101). At least 30 persons with Lithuanian names have graduated from just one Australian university, the University of Tasmania (*Lithuanian Papers*, 1997, p.66).

Many Lithuanian migrants have entered **professions**, mostly after years of arduous study and sacrifice. Some of the doctors, dentists, lawyers and others whose qualifications were not recognised in Australia, went back to universities here and qualified again. Some laboured in menial jobs during the day and studied at night. In some families, wives worked long hours, while husbands studied full-time; or vice versa (Metraštis I, 1961, p.267). Some qualified Lithuanian immigrants continued working well below the level of their training, while some became self-employed in new fields. In Geelong, for example, an experienced Lithuanian doctor was not allowed to practise, so he opened a successful grocer's business instead (Metraštis I, 1961, p.285). In Perth, another Lithuanian doctor retrained and became a pharmacist.

Most Lithuanian immigrants have become Australian citizens, and have proven they to be loyal members of the Australian society. They have a very low crime rate (Clyne, 1982). They have fought with the Australian forces in Korea and in Vietnam. Several Lithuanians have risen to important ranks in the Australian armed forces. Juozas Lukaitis is a Commander in the Royal Australian Navy Reserve.

Some twenty-five Lithuanians in Australia have since been honoured with Australian and British decorations. In Wollongong, steelworks employee and art collector Bronius (Bob) Šredersas donated his valuable art collection to the State of New South Wales. The collection consisted of 88 paintings and collections of curios. In 2000, the Šredersas collection was valued at \$1.5 million; and it keeps appreciating (Poželaitė-Davis, 2005, p.3).

At Lobethal, South Australia, Lithuanian migrant Jonas Vanagas researched the history of the early settlers in the town and district. He set up a municipal museum in 1956, of which he was later appointed curator. The museum was extended in 1961 (Metraštis I, 1961, pp.159, 208).

Lithuanians acquired impressive meeting places: Lithuanian houses, halls and museums in Melbourne, Geelong, Sydney, Brisbane and Perth; they built *two* Lithuanian Houses and a church in Adelaide.

Each larger Lithuanian community in Australia has its own library, with the books paid for by the community members. Lithuanians are still footing the costs of publishing two newspapers (one weekly, one fortnightly) in Australia now, without any State or philanthropic subsidies.

Unfortunately, fellow Australians did not always welcome these initiatives. When the Geelong Lithuanian community bought two blocks of land in 1950 to build a community hall, an article appeared in the local paper, protesting that this would 'stop assimilation'. Difficulties were experienced in obtaining a building permit for a 'Lithuanian House' from the local authority, even after the original blocks of land were exchanged for new plots in another, non-residential area (Metraštis I, 1961, p.202).

At least 26 former Lithuanian migrants have since risen to **academic** positions in Australian universities and research establishments. Seven Lithuanian sportspeople have represented Australia at the Olympic Games and in other important events. A second-generation Lithuanian, Adam Ramanauskas is prominent in Australian rules football: after a brave struggle with cancer, he continues to play for Essendon.





\* On arrival in Australia, Lithuanians formed their own sports clubs. Some of these clubs are still in existence today. *Pictured:* Melbourne women's basketball team "Varpas" in the 1950s. - Photo: *Metraštis I.*

In 1961, Melbourne Lithuanians formed their own credit co-operative *Talka*, to help with housing loans and other financial needs. The cooperative later expanded to Sydney and Adelaide. The three co-operatives are still operating successfully today.

There is also a separate Australian Lithuanian Foundation Inc. Its aims are to foster and financially support Lithuanian immigrants' cultural activities.

Soon after their arrival in Australia, Lithuanian women formed highly effective **self-help** social service committees in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide and elsewhere. This was back in the days when the Australian government-run welfare services were still in the early stages (M.Baltutis, 1981, p.35).

In 1975, the Lithuanian Women's Welfare Association Inc. in Sydney built a village for elderly citizens (V.Baltutis, 1983, p.394). In the 1980s, the Lithuanian Women's Association of South Australia (*Motery Sekcija*) established hostel type accommodation for the elderly and incapacitated Lithuanians in Adelaide.

Kee (1989, quoted in Clyne, 1991, p.69) has found that the Lithuanians in Australia have recorded low unemployment rates, even lower than English-speaking monolinguals.

### **Retaining the Lithuanian identity**

All the evidence suggests that many immigrants of Lithuanian origin in Australia have been, in the main, very keen to maintain their Lithuanian identity and culture. The need to preserve one's Lithuanian identity (*lietuvybė*) was stressed at every opportunity. Endogamy, that is, marrying inside the Lithuanian ethnic group, was 'the right thing to do' (Vasta & Castles, 1996, p.153). In the case of the Lithuanian immigrants, however, this was easier said than done: the number of Lithuanian males in Australia was many times higher than Lithuanian women.

Some post-war Lithuanian migrants joined the existing Australian Lithuanian Society in Sydney, when they first arrived in Australia. In 1950, this Society was expanded and re-organized into a Federal body to be known as the Australian Lithuanian Community from August 1, 1950. According to the Community's constitution, all Lithuanian nationals in Australia and their families automatically became members of the Community.

The Community's statutes called upon its members to develop their Lithuanian national identity and to work for the restoration of Lithuania's independence (Straukas, 1983, p.13). Administratively, the Community was divided into geographical districts (*apylinkė*) and some smaller units (*seniūnija*).

The Federal Executive, elected for a two-year term by a Council of delegates, ran the whole Community. For the first 20 years, the Federal Executive was located in Sydney. Commencing in 1971, its headquarters started rotating among the larger centres of Adelaide, Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney.

The Australian Lithuanian Community, headed by its Federal Executive, concerned itself with many matters: publication of a weekly Lithuanian-language newspaper, *Mūsų Pastogė*, underwriting the production of some books, establishment of libraries, co-operation with other Lithuanian organizations (e.g., the Priests' Secretariat), collaboration with the Baltic Council of Australia and with the Lithuanian World Community.

In later years, especially in 1974-1978, the Community also engaged in political activism in Australia. Responsibility for the newspaper was transferred to a separate *Lietuvių Bendruomenės Spaudos Sąjunga* (Lithuanian Community Publishing Society Limited) in November 1977 (Baltutis, 1983, p.63).

There were many other Lithuanian organizations in Australia, ranging from Catholic parishes and Lithuanian Scouts to folk dancers, choirs and repertory groups. Some of these functioned under the auspices of the Australian Lithuanian Community, while others were quite separate and independent.

One of these independent bodies, the Australian Lithuanian Cultural Foundation, was established in Melbourne in 1948. It had branches in Adelaide and Geelong. The Foundation's aim was to prepare curricula for weekend schools, to collect books for Lithuanian libraries and to organize cultural events - locally, Australia-wide and internationally.

Until it ceased functioning in 1961-1962, the Australian Lithuanian Cultural Foundation had successfully established Saturday schools at all larger centres. Volunteer teachers taught Lithuanian language, history and culture, as a supplementation to the normal curricula the children learnt in Australian schools during the week.

In 1962, the Australian Lithuanian Community set up its own Federal sub-committee for cultural matters, the Federal Cultural Council (*Krašto Kultūros Taryba*). Responsibility for Saturday schools was gradually taken over by the local branches of the Community (Kazokas, 1992, p.60). A separate funding structure, the Australian Lithuanian Foundation Inc., was established in Melbourne in 1972 and incorporated in 1977, to foster Lithuanian migrants' cultural activities.

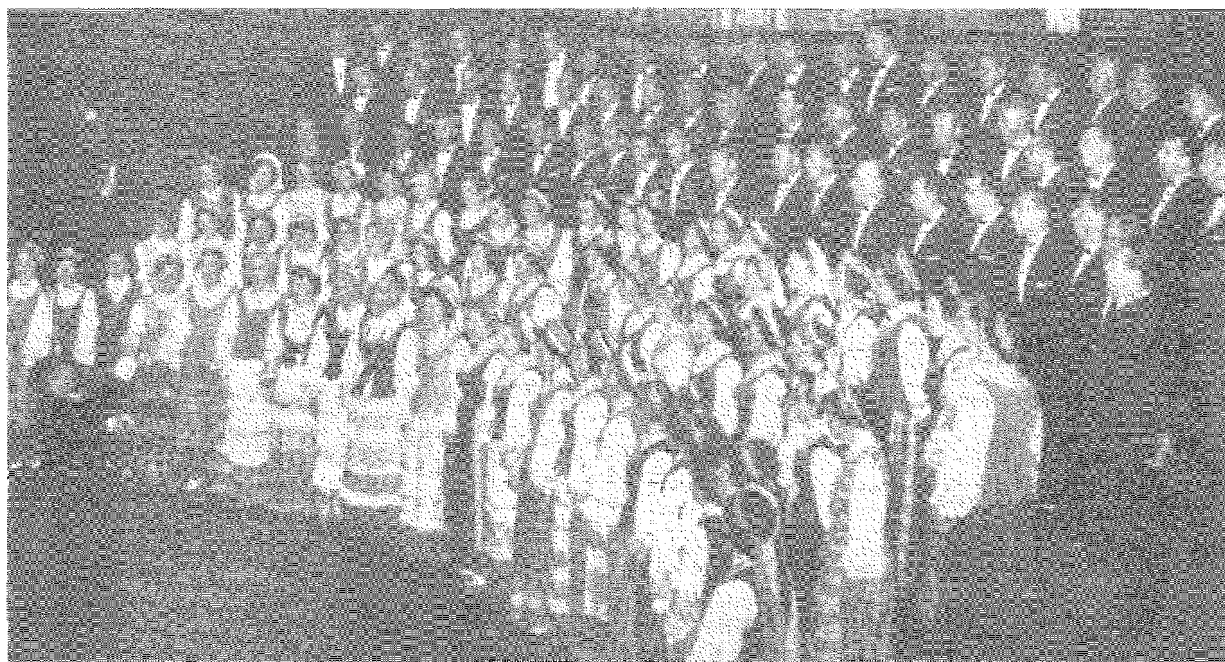
The Foundation's charter allows it to be active in many fields, but the Foundation tends to step in directly only when there is an obvious need that has not been met from other quarters (Baltutis, 1983, p.71).

In March, 1971, the teaching of Lithuanian to senior schoolchildren in Melbourne moved from the self-help community school to the Victorian educational system. The Victorian Department of Education approved the syllabi and hired teachers.

At the same time, the original community school continued teaching primary classes and the two-year advanced Lithuanian course. However, it took another four years and a lot of effort by Mr Petras Sungaila and other Lithuanian educationalists before H.S.C. Lithuanian was finally accepted as a matriculation subject by the Victorian authorities, similarly to other modern languages such as German and French. The Victorian Universities and Schools Examination Board initially examined interstate candidates in H.S.C. Lithuanian from South Australia and New South Wales. Later, those States established their own examination bodies for H.S.C. Lithuanian [Adelaide, 1978; Sydney, 1980] (Baltutis, 1983, p.282).

These developments show why the establishment of university courses of Lithuanian Studies was considered to be important by community members.

A separate in-depth study has since been completed at the University of Tasmania. It has identified and examines the institutional factors that had influenced the establishment, and the cessation, of Lithuanian courses in Australian universities.



**\* Most Lithuanian immigrants came to Australia under a two-year contract to the Federal Government. This often meant, they were allocated to heavy labouring jobs. Undeterred by their physical exhaustion, however, the Lithuanians promptly formed their own singing ensembles, folk dancing groups and repertory theatres. *Pictured:* Combined all-Australian Lithuanian choir, performing in Sydney Town Hall on 28 December, 1960.**

The Tasmanian study has constructed a new model for the promotion of scholarship in Lithuanian Studies (Taškūnas, 2005). This model has already been introduced and practised successfully at the University of Tasmania, for the past 20 years. The same model can also serve as an alternative scheme for the maintenance of other low demand language and cultural studies in higher education.

### **Need for more research**

More research remains to be done, to document the diverse cultures brought to Australia by migrants. Considerable data, so far unused, remain accumulated in ethnic libraries and in private collections.

Apart from their ethnic value, these documents are also part of recent Australian history - sometimes obscured and sometimes unknown altogether. Since, however, many of these source materials are written in ethnic languages, accessibility to them may increasingly become more difficult, especially if bilingualism is allowed to wane in Australia (Smolicz, 1992, pp.10-12).

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